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Taft, William Howard

Address made by President Taft...

[Philadelphia]

[1911]

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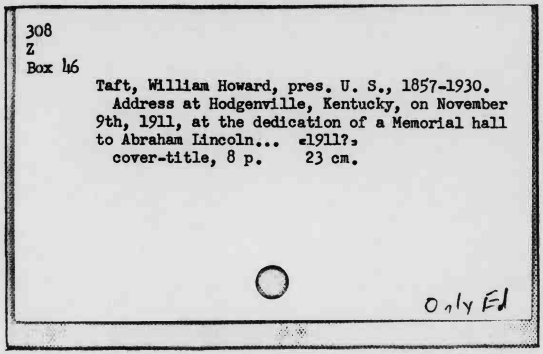
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Taft, William Howard, pres. U. S., 1857-1930.
Address at Hodgenville, Kentucky, on November
9th, 1911, at the dedication of a Memorial hall
to Abraham Lincoln... [1911?]
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Address Made by President Taft

at Hodgenville, Kentucky, on

NOVEMBER 9th, 1911

at

The Dedication of a Memorial Hall

to

Abraham Lincoln

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Sent out with the Compliments of George H. Paine, Philadelphia, Pa., and the request that each recipient read the statement of Mr. Taft which is printed on the back page hereof, and which is taken from the report of an interview with Mr. Taft, published in *The Outlook*

ADDRESS OF PRESIDENT TAFT AT THE DEDICATION OF A MEMORIAL HALL TO ABRAHAM LINCOLN, AT HODGENVILLE, KENTUCKY, NOVEMBER 9, 1911.

There is nothing so fascinating, on the one hand, and nothing so difficult, on the other, as the tracing by heredity of the development of genius and real greatness. Perhaps this is because there are so few instances in history that prompt the search. The explanation of Lincoln and his wonderful character from his origin and environment is almost as difficult as the explanation of Shakespeare; but the passion of the world grows for more intimate knowledge of his personality, and a deeper inquiry into the circumstances of his wonderful life. No year passes that something more is not written of him, and testimonials in loving memory and interest increase. The nation itself, however, has yet to embody in marble or bronze its widened appreciation of him as its savior. Nothing of his characteristics is too incidental for those who study over again, his great speeches and messages and trace again the amazing story from the lowly home in Kentucky whence he sprung to the height of his glory in his martyrdom.

It is eminently appropriate that the farm where Lincoln was born should come into public possession, and should have erected on it, a suitable memorial in which to preserve mementos of his personality and biographies of his life.

Few men have come into public prominence who came absolutely from the soil as did Abraham Lincoln. It is difficult to imagine the lack of comfort, accommodation, and the necessities of life that there were in the cabin in which he was born. With an illiterate and shiftless father, and a mother who, though of education and force, died before he reached youth, his future was dark indeed. In the stepmother that his father found for him, however, he had a woman of strength of character and of education enough

to assist him. He says he never received any education except reading and writing and arithmetic to the rule of three; but he had access to books, and whether he kept a store, or acted as a flatboatman on the Mississippi, or finally came to study law, he read the books he had thoroughly, and they included the Bible and Shakespeare. One of his biographers who knew him well, says that after he had finished this small library, he read some but he thought much more. He thought of what he read, and he exercised his intellect by constant practice till he made his logical processes an instrument to search truth and analyze facts that has rarely been equalled in any one. The almost squalor in which he passed his early life made him familiar with the sufferings, thoughts and sympathies of the plain people; and when he came to great power, his understanding of their reasoning and of their views gave him an advantage in interpreting their attitude which cannot be overstated. He followed closely the popular judgment, but he did not yield to it, save when his reasoning faculties established its correctness.

His evident sympathy for the colored race, his roused sense of justice in their behalf, his earnest passions to secure them freedom and equality of opportunity, had their inspiration in the sufferings and limitations of his own early life.

He was not slow, but he was cautious, deliberate, attentive, as befitted one who insisted on establishing every proposition that he adhered to by original reasoning from fundamental postulates. The lucidity and clearness of his thought manifested itself in the simplicity, directness and clearness of his style. He had imagination and he loved poetry. He had the rythm of language, and though purely self-educated, these circumstances developed a power of literary expression that the world, and especially the literary world, has come fully to recognize and enjoy.

Humor he used in his conversation, stories of humor he told, as he said once, to enable him to deny requests or to express difference of opinion without abruptness and without hurting the feelings of his petitioner. But humor he rarely introduced into his carefully prepared speeches or his messages. A serious aspect of the subject he was discussing and his intense earnestness in framing the reasons for his conclusion so as to impress its justice on the reader or the listener, prevented him from the use of wit or humor, though it was always at his command.

He was a lawyer, and a good one. He studied his cases hard, and he prepared his arguments with the force and clearness that might have been expected from one of his mental make-up. His mind was luminous with truth. His conscience was governed by devotion to right, and the tenderness of his heart was only restrained by his intellect and his conscience. His determination to see both sides and reason out conflicting arguments to a satisfactory conclusion, made him tolerant and patient beyond conception.

The story of his dealings with McClellan, with the members of his Cabinet, and with others unconscious of the great genius and heart with whom they were in personal touch, exasperates the sympathetic reader and arouses a protest that vents itself in contempt toward many of those who surrounded him and yet did not measure the great nature they were privileged to know. The diary of his Cabinet officers shows how under his very nose, and generally with his clear perception of it, political combinations against his interest were formed, only to be dissolved and fall harmless through the patient tact of this master of men, this greatest of diplomatists.

When he came to the Presidency he had had only the experience of two terms in the Legislature, of one term in Congress, of the political discussions and debates in an interior district, and of the great debate with Douglas. He

had no training at all in administrative matters, and when there was presented to him the awful task which the threatened secession of the Southern States presented, he had to feel his way. Seward, having been beaten by Lincoln by accident as he conceived, and feeling himself much better qualified for the Presidency, did not hesitate to attempt to usurp Lincoln's functions as President, by distributing patronage in various departments until in that quiet, masterly but humorous way, Lincoln took the reins and held them to the end. With Seward, with Stanton, with Chase, he had his trials. Chase was a great lawyer, a sincere, courageous and consistent abolitionist, an acute politician with the highest ambition, and with no delicacy or embarrassing sense of loyalty that would prevent him from organizing a combination to defeat Mr. Lincoln's political purposes, and to elect Mr. Chase. Stanton was a great, rough, able administrator, but he was rugged and honest and effective, and Lincoln crossed him only when he had to and treated his excesses of impatience with that humorous tolerance that shows himself in so many stories of encounters between them. With no knowledge of military strategy, he developed out of his own study a clearness of perception and a common sense view of the needs of the Army which make his letters models of strategic suggestion.

In the outset Mr. Lincoln encountered the difficulties that fall to the lot of any responsible head of a government, difficulties which are intensified by the greatness of the issues at hand, but which all have the same characteristics when they arise from the overzeal of moral reformers. Those who wished slavery abolished felt toward Mr. Lincoln a greater degree of hatred and contempt during the two years of his administration than even the rebels themselves. Brooking no delay, accepting every cause as a mere pretext, they pounced upon Mr. Lincoln with emphatic

denunciation and bitter attack, but he knew better than they what was necessary before he took the step of emancipation they were suppressing. He knew better than they the loss of support he would suffer in the border States. He knew better than they that he must delay until the emancipation proclamation could be issued, not to break up slavery, not to effect a constitutional amendment, but only for military reasons, and with military purpose; and so he bared his breast to the shafts of criticism from this most important element of the Republican party, and waited. No man in public life was ever so much abused by his friends as Lincoln. The contrast between his position in history today and the description of him by his friendly critics during the Civil War can hardly be credited.

The great reason for the present memorial is the constant reminder it furnishes of the unexplained and unexplainable growth and development, from the humblest and homeliest soil, of Lincoln's genius, intellect, heart and character that have commended the gratitude of his countrymen for the good he worked with them and awakened the love and devoted admiration of a world.

From the "Outlook."

Question. "I assume that you know that it has been widely hinted that your tour was the opening of your campaign for re-election?"

Mr. Taft's Answer. "Certainly, as is the case with all Administrations, much of what I have done since I have been in office has had some political color put upon it by those who were inclined to be critical. The truth is, however, that political considerations have not weighed heavily with me. I have tried to do in each case what seemed to me the wisest thing, regardless of its effect upon my own future. Indeed, in more than one instance, I have been perfectly conscious whose bad blood would be stirred by some act of mine or some refusal to act. The circumstance that the same persons who hail me, after one application of equal justice, as a far-seeing conservative patriot denounce me after the next as an unreasoning radical does not greatly disturb my equanimity. I set that down as 'all in a day's work.'

"I am very grateful for the honors the people have given me. I do not affect to deny the satisfaction I should feel if, after casting up the totals pro and con, and striking a balance, they should decide that my first term had been fruitful enough of good to warrant their enlisting me for another. Any man would be proud of such a verdict. But I have not been willing, nor shall I be, to purchase it at the sacrifice of my freedom to do my duty as I see it. My happiness is not dependent on holding any office, and I shall go back to private life with no heart-burnings if the people, after an unprejudiced review of my Administration, conclude that some one else can serve them to their greater advantage."

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